ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT, FONSI AND DECISION RECORD

BLM, Bishop Field Office
351 Pacu, Suite 100
Bishop, CA 93514

EA Number: CA-017-05-65

Lease/Serial/Case File No.: Long Valley Leks/Whitmore Tubs

Proposed Action Title/Type:

Sage Grouse Lek Protection and Recreational Access Management in the Long Valley Management Area - Whitmore Tubs and the Lek 1, Lek 5 and Lek 8 Vicinities

Location of Proposed Action:

Long Valley Management Area, Mono County, California

T3S, R29E, SW ¼ Section 18, NW ¼ Section 19, SE ¼ Section 19, SW ¼ Section 20, W ½ Section 29, E ¼ Section 30, E ½ Section 31, and W ¼ Section 32, MDM&B

Applicant (if any): BLM, Bishop Field Office, Wildlife and Recreation Project

Plan Conformance:

The proposed action is subject to the Bishop Resource Management Plan (RMP), approved March 25th, 1993. The proposed action was developed to implement RMP guidance and designed to ensure conformance with General Policies, Area Manager's Guidelines, Valid Existing Management, Standard Operating Procedures, Decisions and Support Needs prescribed in the Bishop RMP. The proposed action has been reviewed and is in conformance with the plan.

Need for Proposed Action:

The proposed action was developed to implement Bishop RMP (BLM, 1993) direction to improve and maintain habitat conditions for sage grouse and to provide for a variety of dispersed recreation opportunities including dispersed camping and recreational hot tub use. The proposed action would implement the following RMP Decisions specific to sage grouse lek protection, dispersed camping and recreational hot tub use in the Long Valley Management Area:

1. Yearlong Protection within 1/3 mile of sage grouse leks (BLM, 1993, p. 17).

2. No Camping within 1/3 mile of sage grouse leks from 3/1 to 6/30 (BLM, 1993, p. 17).

3. Provide for recreational hot tub use while mitigating impacts to endangered, threatened and sensitive species, riparian areas and wet meadows (BLM, 1993, p. 37).

Additional RMP Decisions and Standard Operating Procedures that support the proposed action include:

1. Yearlong Protection of endangered, threatened, candidate, and sensitive plant and animal habitats (BLM, 1993, p. 17).

2. Yearlong Protection of aspen groves, meadows and riparian areas (BLM, 1993, p. 17).

3. Seasonal Protection within 2 miles of active sage grouse leks from 5/1 to 6/30 (BLM, 1993, p. 17).

4. Manage candidate species, sensitive species and other species of management concern in a manner to avoid the need for listing as state or federal endangered or threatened species (BLM, 1993, p. 12).

5. Mitigation, where needed, will be applied to eliminate or reduce resource problems caused by OHV use (BLM, 1993, p. 14).

Recent concern over the status of sage grouse populations throughout the western United States has resulted in several attempts to have sage grouse listed as either threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. To date, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has received 8 petitions to list sage grouse as either threatened or endangered in various portions of their range (Kritz, 2005). One of these petitions, filed in December 2001 by the Institute for Wildlife Protection, petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service to emergency list "the Mono Basin population of the Greater Sage-Grouse" as endangered. This petition was specific to sage grouse in Long Valley and several other adjacent breeding populations in Mono County, California and Lyon County, Nevada. Sage grouse in Long Valley were also covered by 3 separate range-wide petitions for "Greater Sage-Grouse" as well as petitions for the "Western subspecies of the Greater Sage-Grouse" and/or the "Eastern subspecies of the Greater Sage-Grouse" depending on where the boundary between the 2 subspecies was delineated. Though the Fish and Wildlife Service determined that listing was not warranted based on any of the petitions relative to the Long Valley sage grouse population at this time, legal action is pending and it is reasonable to expect that efforts to have sage grouse listed under the Endangered Species Act will continue in the future. In addition to Bishop RMP direction, this interest in sage grouse conservation and the potential for sage grouse to be listed under the Endangered Species Act highlights the need for the proposed action.

Several conservation planning efforts have been initiated in response to the listing petitions cited above and the need to improve sagebrush and sage grouse conservation throughout the west. For the Long Valley sage grouse population, conservation planning is covered by the Bi-State Local Area Planning Group, South Mono Population Management Unit (PMU), as part of the "Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan for Nevada and Eastern California (NDOW, 2004)." The South Mono PMU working group identified recreational activities in Long Valley, including recreational hot tub use and associated dispersed camping and off-road vehicle use, as a priority for management attention. In November of 2004, BLM released the "National Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy" to support the development and implementation of conservation plans and "on-the-ground" conservation actions to conserve sage grouse at the local level (BLM, 2004). Both of these conservation planning efforts identify the need to develop and implement conservation actions designed to mitigate recreational impacts to sage grouse.

Description of the Proposed Project Area and Proposed Action:

The proposed project area is located on public lands northwest of the Benton Crossing Road in the Long Valley Management Area, Mono County, California. The project area encompasses three traditional sage grouse strutting grounds (leks/lek complexes) and adjacent near lek habitats that constitute critical breeding habitat for the Long Valley sage grouse population. These include the Lek 1/Lek 1A complex, Lek 5, and the Lek 8/Lek 8A complex. The Lek 1/Lek 1A complex and Lek 5 are located adjacent to the Whitmore Road between the Benton Crossing Road and the Hot Creek Road. The Lek 8/Lek 8A complex is located adjacent to the Little Antelope Valley Road west of Cashbaugh Ranch. Sage grouse strutting was first documented in 1953 for the Lek 1/Lek 1A complex, 1957 for Lek 5, and 1960 for the Lek 8/Lek 8A complex. All of these leks/lek complexes are located on BLM managed public lands within the proposed project area.

Three long-established recreational hot tubs known locally as the "Rock Tub", the "Shepherd's Tub", and the "Crab Cooker" are also located within the proposed project area. The Rock Tub and the Shepherd's Tub are located on, and accessed via, BLM managed public lands. The Crab Cooker is located on City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP) lands and accessed via BLM managed public lands. All 3 tubs and their primary access routes existed when the Bishop RMP Record of Decision was published in 1993.

The proposed action is designed to meet RMP objectives to provide for recreational hot tub use while mitigating impacts to endangered, threatened and sensitive species, riparian areas and wet meadows. The proposed action specifically targets the protection and improvement of critical sage grouse breeding habitat including leks and important near lek alkali meadow and sagebrush habitats. The objectives of the proposed project are: (1) to maintain and improve recreational access to long-established hot tubs and associated parking areas and dispersed campsites in the proposed project area; (2) to reduce human disturbance during the sage grouse breeding season on leks and in near lek habitats in the proposed project area; and (3) to mitigate recreational impacts to alkali meadow and sagebrush habitats adjacent to leks/lek complexes in the proposed project area.

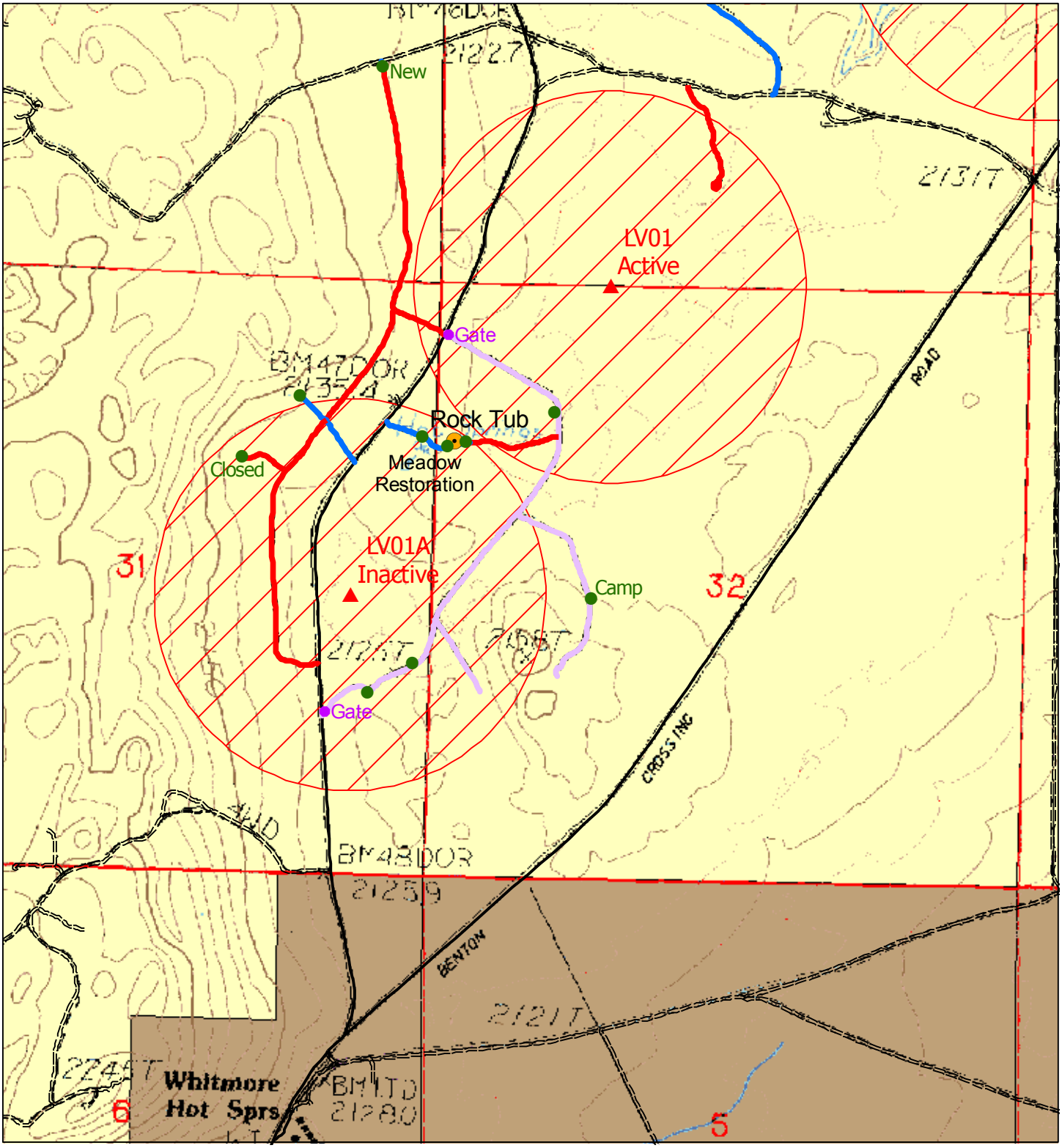
Specific actions proposed to meet RMP objectives are described below:

<u>Rock Tub and the Lek 1/Lek 1A Vicinity (Figure 1)</u>

Improve the access route (0.16 miles) in the northeast ¼ of the northeast ¼ of section 31 from the Whitmore Road into the Rock Tub and the adjacent parking areas and undeveloped campsites in the northwest ¼ of the northwest ¼ of section 32. This route and the parking areas and undeveloped campsites adjacent to the tub site would be graded, filled and hardened where needed to improve vehicle access during wet conditions. No grading or improvement work would occur outside the footprint of existing routes or disturbed areas. Culverts and/or water bars would be constructed where needed to ensure that spring and tub outflows remain on the alkali meadow south of the tub site. This route and the adjacent parking areas and undeveloped campsites would be delineated using natural rock and/or treated log barriers to maintain their existing footprints. All improvements would be limited to the least intensive method required to achieve project objectives.

Close and rehabilitate the redundant access route (0.15 miles) into the Rock Tub via the loop route east of Whitmore Road in the northwest ¼ of the northwest ¼ of section 32. Closure would be implemented using natural rock and/or treated log barriers. A variety of soil aeration

Sage Grouse Lek Protection and Recreational Access Management
Rock Tub and the Lek 1/Lek 1A Complex



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Land Ownership
- BLM
- LA DWP

Sage Grouse Leks
- Sage Grouse Leks
- RMP 1/3 Mile Lek Protection Zone

0 0.125 0.25 0.5 Miles

1:15,000

US Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Bishop Field Office
October 2005

Proposed Access Management
- Improve/Retain Access
- Seasonal Closure
- Close/Rehabilitate
- Gate
- Primitive Camp/Parking Area

Figure 1. Rock Tub and the Lek 1/Lek 1A Vicinity.

and re-vegetation techniques including ripping, vertical mulching, planting and seeding would be implemented where needed to augment natural re-vegetation. A combination of mowing, grubbing and burning would be used to remove rabbitbrush invading the alkali meadow southwest of this closure and the tub site.

Seasonally close from 3/1 to 6/30 the loop route (0.93 miles) and 2 dead-end extensions (0.50 miles) east of Whitmore Road and the Rock Tub in the northwest ¼ of the southeast ¼ of section 31 and the west ¼ of section 32. Seasonal closure would be implemented using 4' x 12' gates typical of the Long Valley area.

Retain the access route (0.15 miles) from the Whitmore Road into the undeveloped campsite 0.25 miles west of the Rock Tub in the northeast ¼ of the northeast ¼ of section 31. No improvements are proposed or needed on this route to achieve project objectives. The boundary of this undeveloped campsite would be delineated using natural rock and/or treated log barriers to maintain the existing footprint.

Close and rehabilitate the redundant route (1.15 miles), cutoff (0.09 miles) and dead-end extension (0.08 miles) immediately west and parallel to the Whitmore Road in the east ¼ of the southeast ¼ of section 30 and the east ¼ of section 31. Closures would be implemented using natural rock and/or treated log barriers. A variety of soil aeration and re-vegetation techniques including ripping, vertical mulching, planting and seeding would be implemented where needed to augment natural re-vegetation.

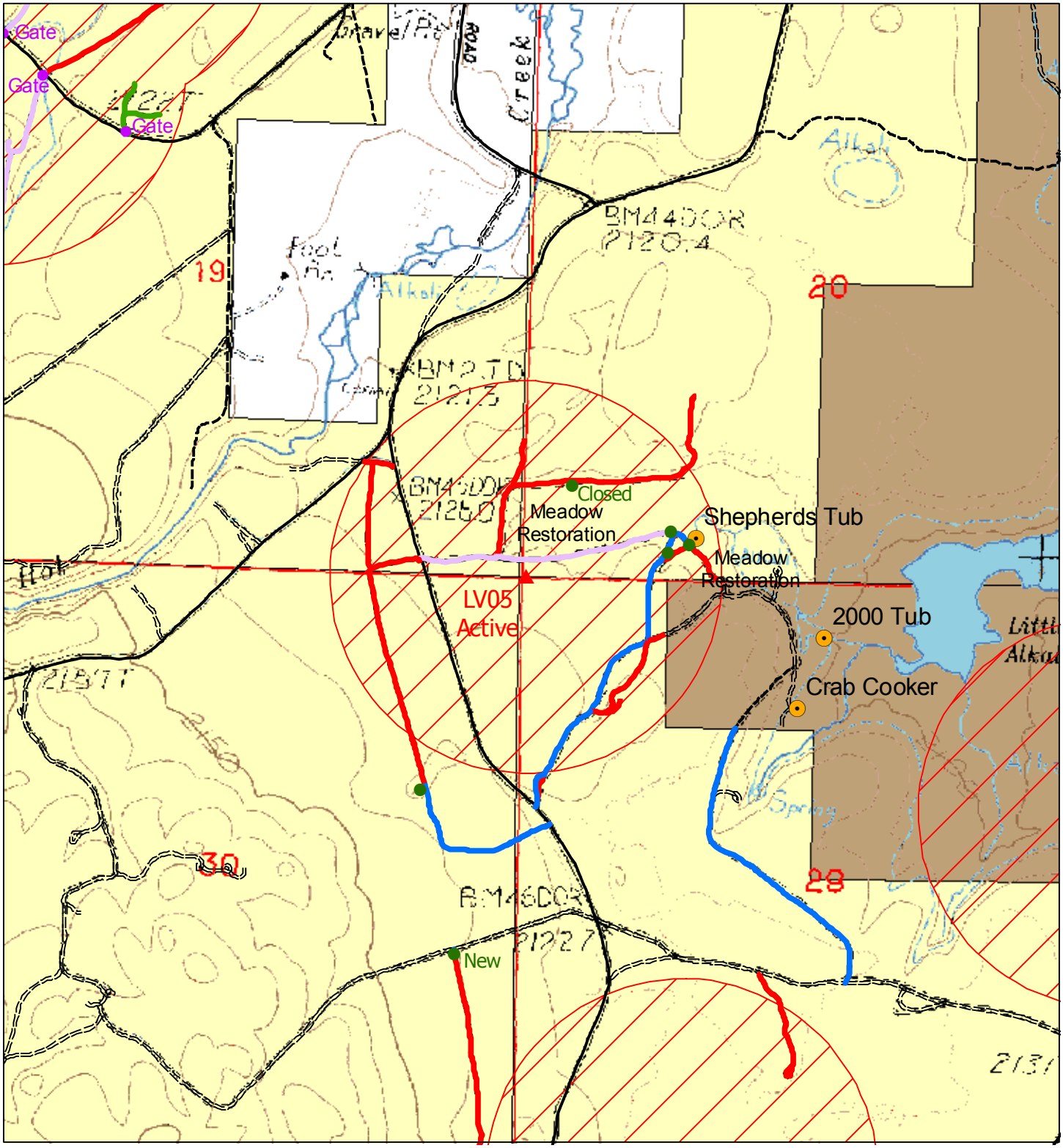
Provide an undeveloped campsite/parking area in the northeast ¼ of the northeast ¼ of section 30 at the northern end of the above closure and the intersection with the route that traverses Doe Ridge. This undeveloped campsite would replace an existing undeveloped campsite at the end of the dead-end extension closure in the southwest ¼ of the northeast ¼ of section 31. The boundary of this undeveloped campsite/parking area would be delineated using natural rock and/or treated log barriers to define the footprint.

Close and rehabilitate the dead-end route (0.18 miles) being pioneered into the northern portion of Lek 1 in the east ½ of the southwest ¼ of section 29. Closure would be implemented using natural rock and/or treated log barriers. A variety of soil aeration and re-vegetation techniques including ripping, vertical mulching, planting and seeding would be implemented where needed to augment natural re-vegetation.

<u>Shepherd's Tub and the Lek 5 Vicinity (Figure 2)</u>

Improve the access route (0.59 miles) in the northwest ¼ of section 29 from the Whitmore Road into the Shepherd's Tub and the adjacent parking areas and undeveloped campsites in the southeast ¼ of the southwest ¼ of section 20. This route and the parking area and undeveloped campsite adjacent to the tub site would be graded, filled and hardened where needed to improve vehicle access during wet conditions. No grading or improvement work would occur outside the footprint of existing routes or disturbed areas. Culverts and/or water bars would be constructed on portions of this route and the parking area adjacent to the tub site where needed to meet access objectives. Portions of this route and the adjacent parking areas and undeveloped campsites would be delineated using natural rock and/or treated log barriers to maintain their existing footprints. All improvements would be limited to the least intensive method required to achieve project objectives.

Sage Grouse Lek Protection and Recreational Access Management
Shepherd's Tub, Crab Cooker and the Lek 5 Vicinty



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Land Ownership
- BLM
- LA DWP
- Private

Sage Grouse Leks
- Sage Grouse Leks
- RMP 1/3 Mile Lek Protection Zone

0 0.125 0.25 0.5 Miles

1:15,000

US Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Bishop Field Office
October 2005

Proposed Access Management
- Improve/Retain Access
- Seasonal or Permanent Closure
- Close/Rehabilitate
- USGS Access
- Gate
- Primitive Camp/Parking Area

Figure 2. Shepherd's Tub, Crab Cooker and the Lek 5 Vicinity.

Close and rehabilitate the redundant spur routes (0.42 miles) in the northwest ¼ of section 29 and the southeast ¼ of the southwest ¼ of section 20 immediately east and parallel to the improved access route into the Shepherd's Tub. Closures would be implemented using natural rock and/or treated log barriers. A variety of soil aeration and re-vegetation techniques including ripping, vertical mulching, planting and seeding would be implemented where needed to augment natural re-vegetation.

Close and rehabilitate the redundant access route (0.43 miles) into the Shepherd's Tub in the southeast ¼ of the southeast ¼ of section 19 and the southwest ¼ of the southwest ¼ of section 20 that traverses the Lek 5 alkali meadow between Whitmore Road and the tub site. A seasonal closure from 3/1 to 6/30 may be implemented on this route if Lek protection and meadow rehabilitation objectives can be achieved without permanent closure. Seasonal closure would be implemented using 4' x 12' gates typical of the Long Valley area. Permanent closure would be implemented using natural rock and/or treated log barriers. Close and rehabilitate the 2 dead-end extensions (0.64 miles) associated with this redundant access route in the southeast ¼ of the southeast ¼ of section 19 and the southwest ¼ of the southwest ¼ of section 20. Closures would be implemented using natural rock and/or treated log barriers. A variety of soil aeration and re-vegetation techniques including ripping, vertical mulching, planting and seeding would be implemented where needed to augment natural re-vegetation.

Retain the access route (0.30 miles) from the Whitmore Road into the undeveloped campsite 0.20 miles west of the access route into the Shepherd's Tub in the southeast ¼ of the northeast ¼ of section 30. No improvements are proposed or needed on this route to achieve project objectives.

Close and rehabilitate the redundant route (0.56 miles) and cutoffs (0.14 miles) north of the above campsite and parallel to the Whitmore Road in the southeast ¼ of the southeast ¼ of section 19 and the northeast ¼ of section 30. Closures would be implemented using natural rock and/or treated log barriers. A variety of soil aeration and re-vegetation techniques including ripping, vertical mulching, planting and seeding would be implemented where needed to augment natural re-vegetation.

<u>Crab Cooker (Figure 2)</u>

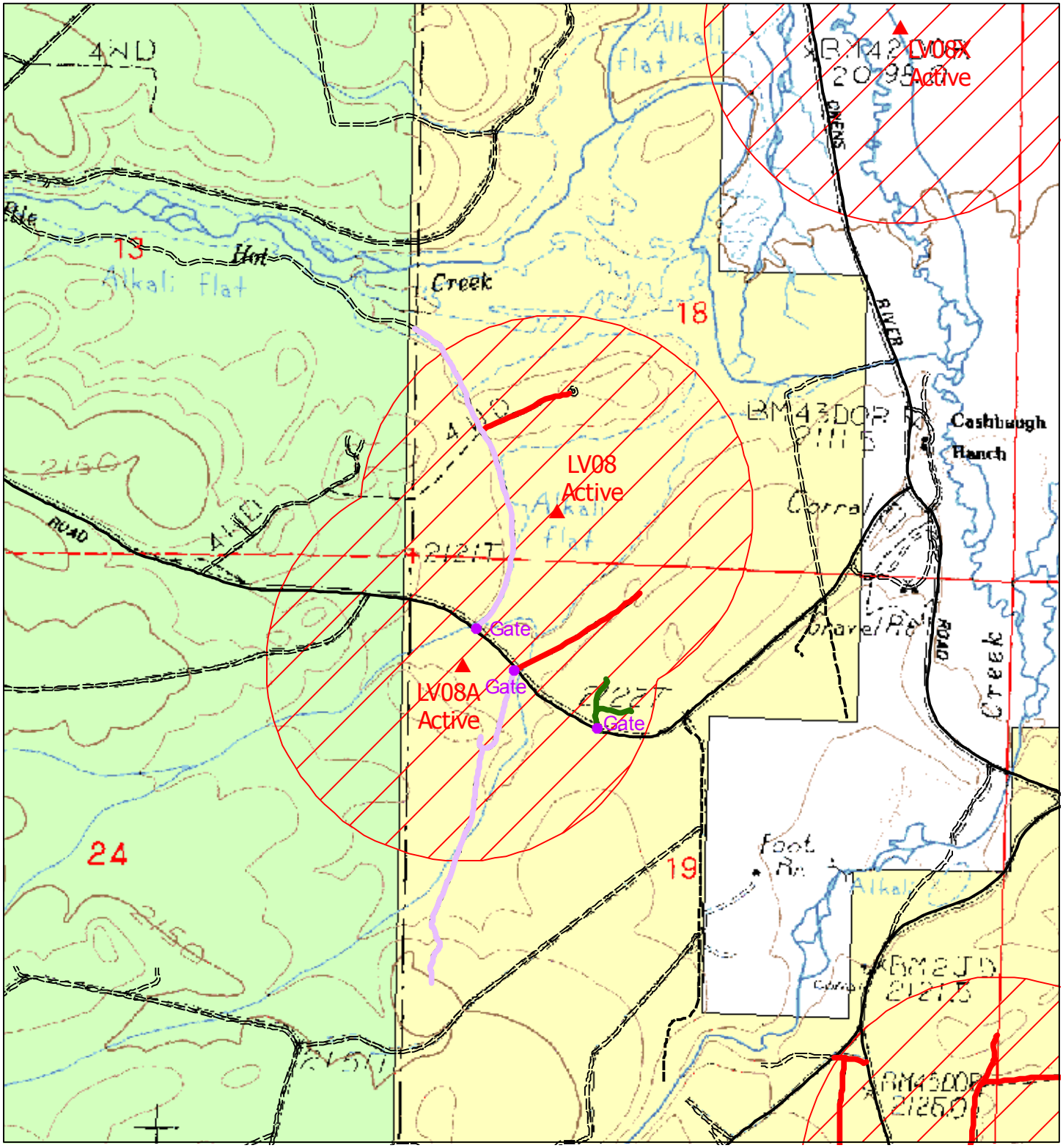
Retain the access route across BLM lands (0.55 miles) in section 29 from the Benton Crossing/Whitmore Road Cutoff into the Crab Cooker on DWP lands in the northeast ¼ of the northwest ¼ of section 29. No improvements are proposed or needed on the BLM portion of this route to achieve project objectives.

<u>Lek 8/Lek 8A Vicinity (Figure 3)</u>

Seasonally close from 3/1 to 6/30 the dead-end route (0.58 miles) across BLM lands that traverses the western portion of the Lek 8 alkali meadow in the northwest ¼ of the northwest ¼ of section 19 and the southwest ¼ of section 18. Seasonal closure would be implemented using a 4' x 12' gate typical of the Long Valley area.

Seasonally close from 3/1 to 6/30 the dead-end route (0.59 miles) that traverses the eastern portion of Lek 8A in the west ¼ of section 19. Seasonal closure would be implemented using a 4' x 12' gate typical of the Long Valley area.

Sage Grouse Lek Protection and Recreational Access Management
Lek 8/Lek 8A Complex



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Land Ownership
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Sage Grouse Leks
- Sage Grouse Leks
- RMP 1/3 Mile Lek Protection Zone

0 0.125 0.25 0.5 Miles

1:15,000

US Department of the Interior
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Proposed Access Management
- Improve/Retain Acces
- Seasonal Closure
- Close/Rehabilitate
- USGS Access
- Gate
- Primitive Camp/Parking Area

Figure 3. Lek 8/Lek 8A Vicinity.

Close and rehabilitate the dead-end route (0.16 miles) onto the low ridge in the northwest portion of Lek 8 in the southwest ¼ of section 18. Closure would be implemented using natural rock and/or treated log barriers. A variety of soil aeration and re-vegetation techniques including ripping, vertical mulching, planting and seeding would be implemented where needed to augment natural re-vegetation.

Close and rehabilitate the dead-end route (0.24 miles) into the southeast portion of Lek 8 in the northwest ¼ of section 19. Closure would be implemented using natural rock and/or treated log barriers. A variety of soil aeration and re-vegetation techniques including ripping, vertical mulching, planting and seeding would be implemented where needed to augment natural re-vegetation.

Restrict public access on the dead-end access routes (0.16 miles) into the USGS seismic monitoring equipment in the southeast portion of the Lek 8/Lek 8A complex in the northwest ¼ of section 19. Public access would be restricted using a 4' x 12' gate typical of the Long Valley area.

Project Implementation Requirements

The following protective measures would be applied during project implementation to reduce the probability of residual impacts and the need for subsequent mitigation:

1. Prior to any ground disturbing activity for route improvement or route closure and rehabilitation, the route would be surveyed for archaeological resources. Project design would be adjusted to avoid any cultural properties identified during this survey to ensure cultural resource protection. If previously undiscovered surface or subsurface cultural resources are found during project implementation, implementation would be stopped and the Bishop Field Office Archeologist notified.

2. No construction activities required for project implementation would be allowed between 3/1 and 6/30 to avoid disturbance to sage grouse or other sagebrush obligates during the breeding season.

3. Improvements to designated hot tub access routes and adjacent parking areas and undeveloped campsites would be completed before redundant access routes to tub sites are closed to ensure recreational access.

4. The source of any road base or fill required for project implementation would be approved by the Bishop Field Office Botanist prior to use to avoid the spread of noxious weeds.

5. All vehicles, tools and material used during project implementation would be washed prior to transport to the project site to avoid the spread of noxious weeds.

6. All improvements required for project implementation would be limited to the least intensive method required to meet project objectives.

7. Gates for seasonal closures would be closed and locked by BLM on 3/1 and reopened on 6/30 annually.

Environmental Impacts:

The proposed project area is not within a Wilderness, Wilderness Study Area, Area of Critical Environmental Concern, nor Wild and Scenic River corridor. Implementation of the proposed action would not affect any lands so designated.

The proposed project area is not within a federal air quality non-attainment area. Implementation of the proposed action would not result in the emission of PM_{10} nor contribute to the formation of fugitive dust. Air quality in the proposed project area would not be affected.

There are no known state or federally listed endangered, threatened or candidate species or habitats within the proposed project area. Implementation of the proposed action would not affect any state or federally listed endangered, threatened or candidate species or habitats. Implementation of the proposed action would benefit sage grouse (BLM sensitive species) and improve sage grouse habitat quality within the proposed project area. Benefits to sage grouse habitat are described in the wildlife section of this environmental assessment. Implementation of the proposed action would benefit non-listed special status plant species within the proposed project area. Special status plant species are covered in the soils and vegetation section of this environmental assessment.

There would be no impacts to prime farm lands, flood plains, or water quality (including ground or surface waters).

There would be no disproportionate impacts to low income or minority groups, per Executive Order 12898 (2/11/94).

Cultural Resources

A Class I records search of the proposed project sites showed that four previous surveys have been conducted within ½ mile of the proposed project area. Within this zone, these surveys have resulted in a total of 510 acres of survey. Twelve archaeological sites have been recorded within ½ mile of the project routes. Of these, only one site, CA-MNO-1788, is located on one of the routes proposed for closure and rehabilitation. Prior to any ground disturbing activity for route improvement or route closure and rehabilitation, the routes would be surveyed and archaeological resources identified and recorded. Project design would be adjusted to avoid impacting cultural properties and in most cases would enhance (e.g., road closures and rehab) cultural resource protection. All cultural properties would be avoided by ground disturbing activities.

Recreation Opportunities

A wide variety of dispersed recreation activities occur within the proposed project area including hot tub use, OHV touring, mountain biking, hunting, camping and enjoyment of the natural setting. Access to recreational opportunities is mainly via county maintained roads and/or unimproved dirt routes which were designated in the Bishop Resource Management Plan (RMP). The designation for all routes on BLM managed public lands outside of the Poleta Canyon Open Area is “limited.” In completing the RMP, the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum planning system was used. Lands within the proposed project area are managed for Semi-Primitive Motorized Recreation.

On November 21st, 1996 the Bishop Field Office adopted the Interagency Vehicle Access Strategy. This strategy was developed to assist in the implementation of the Field Office's vehicle access program and to meet the goals of the Bishop RMP. Implementation of the proposed action would enhance semi-primitive motorized recreational opportunities and better protect resource values within the proposed project area.

The direct effects of the proposed action on existing recreational access in the proposed project area are summarized below:

Hot Tub Access

Access into the Rock Tub and 3 adjacent parking areas/undeveloped campsites would be improved. Access into the Shepherd's Tub and 3 adjacent parking areas/undeveloped campsites would be improved. Access into the Crab Cooker would be retained.

Undeveloped Campsites/Parking Areas and Dead-Ends

Access into the dispersed/undeveloped campsite west of Whitmore Road and the Rock Tub would be retained. Access into the dispersed/undeveloped campsite west of Whitmore Road and the designated access routes into the Shepherd's Tub and the Crab Cooker would be retained. One new dispersed/undeveloped campsite would be created west of Whitmore Road and the designated access routes into the Shepherd's Tub and the Crab Cooker. Vehicle access into 1 dispersed/undeveloped campsite, 3 roadside parking areas and 2 dead-end routes would be restricted during the seasonal closure period in the vicinity of Lek 1/Lek 1A and the Rock Tub. Vehicle access into 2 dead-end routes would be restricted during the seasonal closure period in the Lek 8/Lek 8A vicinity near Little Hot Creek. Vehicle access into 2 dispersed/undeveloped campsites and 6 dead-end routes (1.31 miles) would be lost.

Route Management

Two routes (0.75 miles) would be improved for access into the Rock Tub, Shepherd's Tub, and associated parking areas and undeveloped campsites. Three routes (1.00 miles) would be retained in their current condition for access into the Crab Cooker and 3 undeveloped campsites west of Whitmore Road. One loop route (0.93 miles) and 4 dead-end routes (1.67 miles) would be seasonally closed from 3/1 to 6/30 to reduce disturbance to sage grouse during the breeding and nesting season. Three redundant access routes (1.86 miles), 3 cutoffs (.23 miles) and 4 spur routes (0.42 miles) would be closed and rehabilitated. One redundant access route (0.43 miles) would be seasonally closed from 3/1 to 6/30 or permanently closed and rehabilitated as required to meet lek protection and meadow restoration objectives.

Visual Resources

The proposed project area is located within a Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class II Objective area. The objective of this class is to retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be low. Management activities may be seen from key observation points, but should not attract the attention of the casual observer. Any changes must repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

The proposed action would be implemented using predominately natural materials and/or materials characteristic of the existing Long Valley landscape. Barriers used to implement road

closures and to define the boundaries of parking areas and undeveloped campsites would be constructed using natural rock and/or treated logs with tones and textures typical of the area. Gates installed to implement seasonal closures would be of the same type and design as are commonly used in Long Valley. Overall, the materials used for project implementation would generally repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the current setting and would not draw the attention of the casual observer. Road closure and rehabilitation efforts would increase vegetative cover on currently disturbed areas and reduce the visual contrast within the larger project area over the long-term. Implementation of the proposed action would not negatively impact visual resources nor violate VRM standards identified in the Bishop RMP.

Soils and Vegetation

Upland soils in the proposed project area are comprised of the Cashbaugh-Buscones complex. These soils are derived from mixed alluvium and volcanic ash, are gravelly loamy in texture, and are moderately well-drained. Alkali meadow soils in the proposed project area consist of the Aquic torriorthent complex which are sandy loam in texture, and are poorly drained.

Vegetation in the proposed project area is a mosaic of sagebrush-steppe plant communities with alkali meadow inclusions. Dominant upland shrub species include low sagebrush (*Artemisia arbuscula)*, mountain big sagebrush (*A. tridentata* ssp. *vaseyana*), Wyoming big sagebrush (*A. tridentata* ssp. *wyomingensis*) and antelope bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentata* var. *tridentata)*. Dominant perennial grasses include Indian rice grass (*Achnatherum hymenoides*), needle and thread (*Hespirostipa comota*), western needlegrass (*Achnatherum occidentalis*) and Thurber's needlegrass (*Achnatherum thurberianum*). Both perennial and annual forbs are abundant and include species from the following genera; Asteraceae, Caryophyllaceae, Cryptantha, Eriogonum, Onagraceae and Viola.

Alkali meadows are a State of California rare natural community, State-ranked S2.1 (very threatened). Dominant species include a variety of perennial grasses such as salt grass (*Distichlis spicata*), alkali cordgrass (*Spartina gracilis*) and Great Basin wild rye (*Leymus cinereus*). Baltic rush (*Juncus balticus*) and a variety of perennial forbs including *Crepis runcinata* ssp. *hallii*, *Ivesia kingii* var. *kingii* and *Pyrrocoma racemosa* var. *sessilifolia*, alkali peppergrass (*Lepidium montanum* var. *nevadense*) and blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium halophytum*) are also common.

Current impacts include soil compaction, erosion, and reduced vegetation cover of key upland and alkali meadow species. Increased vehicle use and poor access under wet conditions has contributed to route proliferation and has exacerbated this loss of soil stability and vegetation cover in both sagebrush-steppe and alkali meadow plant communities.

Implementation of the proposed action would ameliorate current vehicular induced impacts such as soil compaction, erosion, and associated loss of soil stability and vegetation cover. By hardening existing access routes users would be able to access recreational destinations without leaving the road to avoid wet areas. The use of barriers to define the footprints of existing parking areas and undeveloped campsites would discourage users from pioneering new routes and disturbing currently intact soils and vegetation communities. The proposed action would eliminate duplicate routes that are causing erosion and loss of vegetative cover in both sagebrush-steppe and alkali meadow plant communities. Route closure and rehabilitation efforts would improve soil surface conditions and facilitate re-vegetation of native species on 4.5 acres. Over the long-term, implementation of the proposed action would protect and improve

soil and vegetation conditions on 4 alkali meadows and several blocks of relatively intact sagebrush steppe within the larger proposed project area.

Special Status Plant Species

Special status plant species are those species that have been listed by the California Native Plant Society as List 1B species, which includes plants that are rare, threatened or endangered in California and elsewhere. All of the plants constituting List 1B meet the definition of Sec. 1901, Chapter 10 (Native Plant Protection Act) or Secs. 2062 and 2067 (California Endangered Species Act) of the California Department of Fish and Game Code, and are eligible for state listing. The Bishop Resource Management Plan (BLM, 1993, p. 17) stipulates yearlong protection of sensitive plants (special status plants) and their associated habitats.

The Long Valley milk-vetch (*Astragalus johannis-howellii*) and the alkali hawksbeard (*Crepis runcinata* ssp. *hallii*) are special status plant species that occur within the proposed project area boundaries, but do not occur on the routes designated for improvement or closure and rehabilitation in the proposed action. Implementation of the proposed action would benefit these species by restoring currently impacted potential habitat within the proposed project area.

Invasive, Non-native Species

Low densities of cheat grass (*Bromus tectorum)* occur in the uplands within the proposed project area. Implementation of the proposed action would help reduce the proliferation of this species by restoring routes adjacent to small infestations which would limit seed transport. Route closure and rehabilitation efforts would also improve soil surface conditions and facilitate re-vegetation of native species.

Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat

The proposed project area includes important wildlife habitat for a wide variety resident and migratory wildlife species dependent upon sagebrush-steppe and associated alkali meadow plant communities. Specific species of management concern identified in the Bishop RMP that inhabit the proposed project area include mule deer (Odocoileus hemionus) and sage grouse (*Centrocercus europhasianus*).

The proposed project area provides important migratory and summer habitat for mule deer from both the Casa Diablo and the Round Valley herds. Deer are present in the proposed project area from early March to early December annually. The largest concentrations of deer occur in the proposed project area during the spring and fall migration periods. Sagebrush-steppe associated plant communities in the proposed project area provide important forage and cover resources for both migrating and summering deer. Bitterbrush, big sagebrush and low sagebrush associated plant communities provide important forage resources. Bitterbrush and big sagebrush associated plant communities provide important thermal and hiding cover.

The proposed project area provides important breeding and nesting habitat for the Long Valley sage grouse population. The proposed project area includes three traditional sage grouse strutting grounds (leks/lek complexes) and associated near lek habitats that provide breeding, roosting, nesting and brooding habitat. These include the Lek 1/Lek 1A complex, Lek 5, and the Lek 8/Lek 8A complex. Sage grouse strutting was first documented in 1953 for the Lek 1/Lek 1A complex, 1957 for Lek 5, and 1960 for the Lek 8/Lek 8A complex. All of these leks/lek complexes are located on BLM managed public lands within the proposed project area.

Annually, the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and City of Los Angeles Department Water and Power (DWP) assess the status of the sage grouse breeding population in Long valley by surveying all known leks for activity, searching for new leks, and obtaining counts of the number of males attending each active lek. Long-term lek data is available for Long Valley from 1953 through the present. Beginning in 1987, the method for conducting annual lek counts was standardized in an attempt to obtain the annual same day high male count, or peak male attendance, for all known active leks. The method used to establish peak male attendance typically involves an experienced person counting at each active lek, on the same day, on at least 3 separate days conducted during the period when female and male presence are at a maximum (Connelly et al. 2003). Leks are monitored for activity beginning in early March to judge the likely period of peak lek attendance. The annual peak single day count is determined by the day with the highest cumulative number of males counted when all active leks are visited. The annual single day peak count is used to monitor sage grouse population trend in Long Valley. Annual monitoring efforts prior to 1987 did not always involve multiple same day lek counts because of problems associated with personnel and weather constraints.

Lek 1/Lek 1A Complex Trend (1987-2005)

From1987 to 2005, male sage grouse attendance in the Lek 1/Lek 1A complex on the day of the Long Valley peak count ranged from a high of 34 in 1987 to a low of 0 in 1991. Average male attendance during this period was 14. The high of 37 corresponds with a peak count of 370 males for all active leks counted in 1987. The low corresponds with a peak count of 165 males for all active leks counted in 1991. Since 2002, male attendance in the Lek 1/Lek 1A complex has ranged from 7-9 birds (well below the 1987-2005 average) while peak counts for all active leks have steadily increased from 238 to 360 males during the same period. These data indicate that male attendance in the Lek 1/Lek 1A complex has remained low while the overall sage grouse population in Long valley has increased to near 1987 levels. Though difficult to quantify a casual relationship, counters have noted both near lek camping and the disturbance of strutting activity during the breeding season in the Lek 1/Lek 1A complex.

Lek 5 Trend (1987-2005)

From1987 to 2005, male sage grouse attendance at Lek 5 on the day of the Long Valley peak count ranged from a high of 23 in 1987 to a low of 0 in 1991, 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003. Average male attendance during this period was 6. The high of 23 corresponds with a peak count of 370 males for all active leks counted in 1987. The low in 1991 corresponds with a peak count of 165 males for all active leks during that year. From 1999 to 2004 male attendance at Lek 5 ranged from 0-1 birds (well below the 1987-2005 average) while peak counts for all active leks ranged from 205-348 (well above the 1991 count) during the same period. Indications were that Lek 5 would soon be inactive even though the overall sage grouse population in Long valley had increased to near 1987 levels. On 7 April 2005, Lek 5 was completely inaccessible to vehicles due to snow and 12 males were counted on the lek. Again, though difficult to quantify a casual relationship, this increase in male attendance corresponded with a substantial spring snow-pack that significantly restricted vehicle access and limited disturbance in the Lek 5 area during the early portion of the 2005 breeding season. By April 15, vehicles had begun to traverse the lek and male attendance had dropped to 8 birds. On April 21, the day of the 2005 Long Valley peak count, male sage grouse attendance at Lek 5 was 7 birds, 4 vehicles were parked near the lek, and the birds were observed being flushed off the lek by a camper at 7:00 a.m.

Lek 8/Lek 8A Complex Trend (1987-2005)

From1987 to 2005, male sage grouse attendance in the Lek 8/Lek 8A complex on the day of the Long Valley peak count ranged from a high of 49 in 1998 to lows of 8 in 1990 and 9 in 1991. Average male attendance during this period was 27. The high of 49 corresponds with a peak count of 195 males for all active leks counted in1998 and a period when numbers were increasing from the lows of the early 1990s. The lows correspond with peak counts of 224 and 165 males for all active leks counted in 1990 and 1991 respectively and a period when numbers were declining. Since 2002, male attendance in the Lek 8/Lek 8A complex has ranged from 19-22 birds (below the 1987-2005 average) while peak counts for all active leks have steadily increased from 238 to 360 males during the same period. These data indicate that male attendance in the Lek 8/Lek 8A complex has remained low while the overall sage grouse population in Long valley has increased to near 1987 levels. Vehicular disturbance and on lek camping has been documented by counters in the Lek 8/Lek 8A complex but at lower levels than in the Lek 1/Lek 1A complex and the Lek 5 area.

Impacts to Wildlife and Wildlife Habitats

Construction activities required for project implementation would result in the temporary disturbance and/or displacement of resident and migratory wildlife in the immediate project vicinity. Project implementation requirements that restrict construction activities from 3/1 to 6/30 would protect sage grouse and other sagebrush obligates from disturbance during the breeding and nesting season. This seasonal restriction on construction activities would also protect mule deer from disturbance during the spring migration period. Some disturbance and displacement of mule deer could occur during the summer and/or fall migration period. Overall, disturbance and displacement impacts associated with project construction activities would occur in the summer or fall, be of limited intensity and duration, and have no long-term negative affect on wildlife in the proposed project area.

Implementation of the proposed action would substantially reduce current recreation induced disturbance and displacement impacts to sage grouse, mule deer and other sagebrush obligate resident and migratory wildlife species in the proposed project area. Disturbance and displacement of sage grouse resulting from camping on leks and in near lek roosting, nesting and brooding habitats during the breeding and nesting season would be reduced or eliminated. Disturbance and displacement of sage grouse resulting from vehicle travel through leks and other important near lek habitats during the breeding and nesting season would also be reduced or eliminated. Mule deer in the proposed project area would experience reduced disturbance and displacement during the spring migration period. Other sagebrush obligate resident and migratory wildlife species would also benefit from reduced disturbance, particularly during the spring breeding and nesting season.

Route closure and rehabilitation efforts would directly improve wildlife habitat conditions by restoring vegetation conditions on 4.5 acres. These restoration efforts would reduce habitat fragmentation and improve forage and cover resources on 4 alkali meadows and several blocks of sagebrush-steppe associated habitats within the larger proposed project area. Over the long-term, implementation of the proposed action would restore and protect 4 alkali meadows and several blocks of intact sagebrush-steppe associated habitats that provide important habitat for sage grouse, migratory mule deer, and other resident and migratory sagebrush obligate species.

Rangeland Resources

The proposed project area is located entirely within the Hot Creek Allotment (6018). The permitee was consulted on August 25th, 2005 to identify any concerns or potential negative affects the proposed action would have on livestock management operations on the allotment. The permitee was supportive of the proposed action and expressed that project implementation would have no negative effect on their ability to manage livestock on the allotment. Implementation of the proposed action would not result in the loss of AUMS nor negatively affect the permitee's ability to manage livestock on the allotment.

Implementation of the proposed action would result in some improvement of ecological conditions on upland range sites and alkali meadows in the proposed project area. These improvements would be limited to the footprint and immediate vicinity of road closures and associated upland and meadow rehabilitation efforts. The beneficial effects of the proposed action on soils and vegetation conditions would benefit rangeland resources in the larger project area over the long-term.

Mineral Resources

This proposed project area is within the Mono-Long Valley Known Geothermal Resource Area (KGRA). There are no past or pending geothermal lease applications in the proposed project area and the potential for geothermal leasing is low. Implementation of the proposed action would not preclude future geothermal leasing in the proposed project area.

There are no lode or placer claims under the provisions of the Mining Law that would be affected by the proposed action. There are no proposed sales, or any interest in sales, for sand, gravel or clay within the proposed project area. Implementation of the proposed action would not interfere with surface rights of claimants under the Mining Law or the Mineral Materials Sales Act.

Hazardous Materials

There are no know hazardous materials sites in the proposed project area and no hazardous materials will be used during implementation of the proposed action. Implementation of the proposed action would not result in the liberation or importation of hazardous materials in the proposed project area.

Cumulative Effects

Cumulative effects are direct or indirect effects that result from an action when considered with other past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions of the agency and other agencies or private parties.

The limited scale and magnitude of the proposed action and associated environmental impacts significantly reduces the probability of negative cumulative effects associated with project implementation. The proposed action would not contribute to negative cumulative effects to the human environment or resource values in or adjacent to the proposed project vicinity.

Description of Mitigation Measures and Residual Impacts:

Protective measures were incorporated into the proposed project design and implementation requirements to reduce the probability of residual impacts and the need for subsequent mitigation. No residual impacts are anticipated and no additional mitigation measures are needed or proposed.

Implementation Monitoring:

Bishop Field Office Wildlife and Recreation Staff would direct and monitor project implementation to ensure conformance with project design and implementation requirements identified in the proposed action.

Effectiveness Monitoring:

Post project monitoring would be conducted annually to assess the effectiveness of the proposed project at meeting project objectives. Visitor use and compliance monitoring would be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed project at meeting stated objectives to maintain and improve recreational access to long-established hot tubs and associated parking areas and dispersed campsites in the proposed project area. Annual lek surveys would be used to monitor changes in overall sage grouse breeding population levels in Long Valley and to monitor changes in sage grouse distribution and lek attendance in the proposed project area. Human disturbance on leks and in near lek habitats during the sage grouse breeding season would also be monitored as part of the annual lek surveys. A combination of photo monitoring and empirical vegetation sampling methods would be used to monitor vegetation response to alkali meadow and sagebrush-steppe rehabilitation efforts in the proposed project area.

Public Input/Persons/Agencies Consulted:

A public meeting to discuss and take comments on the proposed project was conducted on August 24th, 2005 at the Crowley Lake Community Center, 458 Pearson Road, Crowley Lake, California. Attendance was limited but included representatives of the Saline Preservation Association (SPA), Friends of the Inyo, and Eastern Sierra Quail Unlimited.

A press release regarding the proposed project that included a brief description of the project area and objectives, notification of the public meeting, and a request for comments was distributed on August 15th, 2005.

KIBS radio covered the proposed project in a news story/interview on August 23rd, 2005 that briefly described the project area and objectives, and also included notification of the public meeting and request for comments.

An article regarding recreational hot tub use and BLM concerns about sage grouse habitat and other resource issues in Long Valley was published in “The Sheet”, a local news and views paper from Mammoth Lakes, California on September 17th, 2004. This article closed with a request for those interested in the issue to contact BLM.

The following entities and individuals attended the public meeting, requested information, and/or provided feedback regarding the proposed project:

Mammoth Four Wheel Drive Club
Mammoth Pacific Geothermal, Mammoth Lakes, CA
Dick Knowles, Public Lands Access Advocate, Bishop, CA
Jerry and Vicki Gabriel, Bishop, CA
Eastern Sierra Quail Unlimited
Eastern Sierra Audubon Society
Friends of the Inyo
Sierra Club, Range of Light Chapter
California Department of Fish and Game
Robert Strub, Keeler, CA
California Native Plant Society, Bristlecone Chapter
Saline Preservation Association
Sophia Anne Merck, Ridgecrest, CA
South Mono PMU Working Group, Bi-State Local Area Sage Grouse Conservation Plan
Gil Yanuk, Nevada Governor's Sage Grouse Conservation Team, Carson City, NV
Jenell Schwab, the Sheet, Mammoth Lakes, CA
Arnie Palu, KIBS Radio, Bishop, CA
Donald Constans, Big Pine, CA
Gary and Alonna Giacomini, Bishop, CA
Don Rager, Bishop, CA
Martin Hogue, Bishop, CA

References:

Bureau of Land Management. 2004. National Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy. U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Washington, D.C.

Bureau of Land Management. 1993. Bishop Resource Management Plan Record of Decision. U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land management, California State Office, Sacramento, CA.

Connelly, J.W., K.P. Reese, and M.A. Schroeder. 2003. Monitoring of Greater Sage-Grouse Habitats and Populations. Station Bulletin 80. College of Natural Resources Experiment Station, College of natural Resources, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID.

Kritz, K. 2005. Summary of Sage-Grouse Petitions Submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office, Reno, NV.

Nevada Department of Wildlife. 2004. Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan for Nevada and Eastern California. Nevada Department of Wildlife, Reno, NV.

Preparer(s):

Steve Nelson, Wildlife Biologist/GIS Specialist
Jim Jennings, Outdoor Recreation Planner
Anne Halford, Botanist
Kirk Halford, Archeologist
Cheryl Seath, Geologist

Date: 21 October 2005

Reviewed By: _____
Joe Pollini, Environmental Coordinator

Date: _____

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FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/DECISION RECORD

I have reviewed this environmental assessment including the explanation and resolution of any potentially significant environmental impacts. The proposed project design incorporates protective measures and implementation requirements that substantially reduce the potential for significant environmental impacts and no additional mitigation measures are required. I have determined that implementation of the proposed action will not have any significant impacts on the human environment and that an EIS is not required.

There will be no effect on threatened or endangered species as a result of the action.

I have determined that the proposed project is in conformance with the Bishop Resource Management Plan, which was approved March 25th, 1993. This plan has been reviewed, and the proposed action conforms to the terms and conditions of the land use plan as required by 43 CFR 1610.5.

The proposed project is also consistent with initial conservation strategies identified for the South Mono Population Management Unit of the Bi-State Local Planning Area in the "Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan for Nevada and Eastern California, June 2004."

The proposed action supports BLM's "National Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy" (November 2004). This strategy identifies sage grouse habitat conservation and the implementation of "on-the ground" conservation actions developed in local area sage grouse conservation plans as Bureau priorities.

It is my decision to implement the project with the protective measures and implementation requirements identified in the proposed action.

Project Implementation Requirements/Mitigation Measures/Remarks:

1. Prior to any ground disturbing activity for route improvement or route closure and rehabilitation, the route will be surveyed for archaeological resources. Project design will be adjusted to avoid any cultural properties identified during this survey to ensure cultural resource protection. If previously undiscovered surface or subsurface cultural resources are found during project implementation, implementation will be stopped and the Bishop Field Office Archeologist notified.

2. No construction activities required for project implementation will be allowed between 3/1 and 6/30 to avoid disturbance to sage grouse or other sagebrush obligates during the breeding season.

3. Improvements to designated hot tub access routes and adjacent parking areas and undeveloped campsites will be completed before redundant access routes to tub sites are closed to ensure recreational access.

4. The source of any road base or fill required for project implementation will be approved by the Bishop Field Office Botanist prior to use to avoid the spread of noxious weeds.

5. All vehicles, tools and material used during project implementation will be washed prior to transport to the project site to avoid the spread of noxious weeds.

6. All improvements required for project implementation will be limited to the least intensive method required to meet project objectives.

7. Gates for seasonal closures will be closed and locked by BLM on 3/1 and reopened on 6/30 annually.

Authorized Official: _____
Bill Dunkelberger, Bishop Field Office Manager

Date: _____